

The Three Rivers Glass Company.

Condensed by Dave Hinson from the book by
Michael Simmons-Smith.

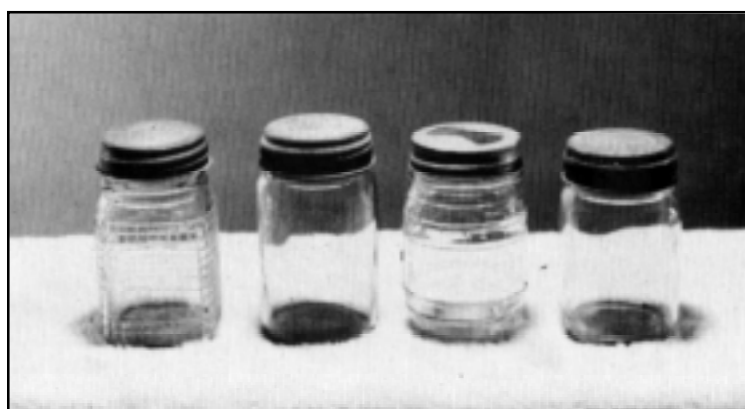
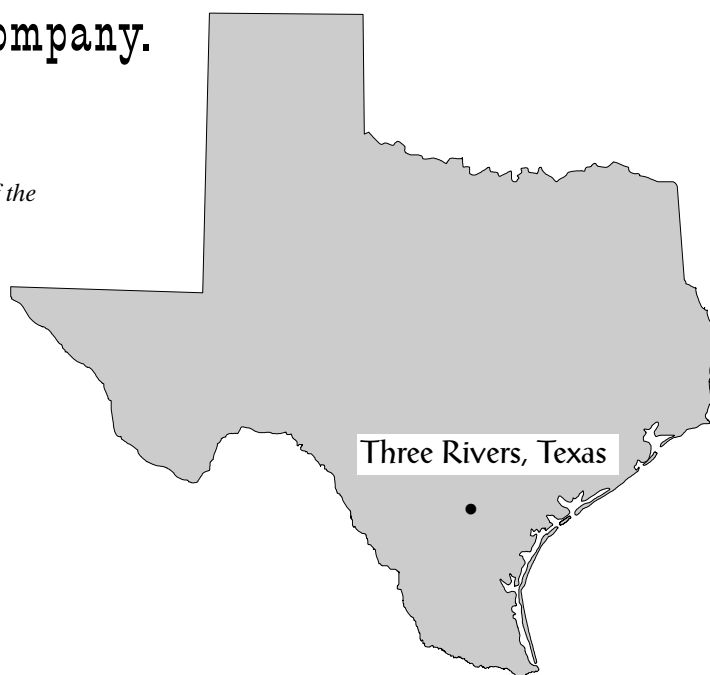
*From the October 1996 Bottles and Extras the magazine of the
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The Three Rivers Glass Company was Texas' first mass-production glass making facility. During its fifteen years of operation, from 1922 to 1937, the small glass factory manufactured a commercial glass product that combined high quality with a unique artistic flair. Despite intense competition from industry giants of that period, the Three Rivers Glass Company managed to capture the major share of the Texas commercial glassware market after only a few short years.

The history of the Three Rivers glass Company is not a classic success story, but rather a classic story of failure in America, typical of the economic roller coaster ride during the first third of the Twentieth Century. The little company achieved a national stature as a quality glassmaker in the late Twenties, and proved itself capable of cracking a market that was dominated by only two or three other large American glass manufacturers. Its spark dimmed in the Thirties with the onslaught of the Great Depression, and was eventually extinguished when the Three Rivers Glass Company was taken over by its largest competition in 1937.

The Three Rivers Glass Company has been gone for several generations, but its legacy lives on in some of the most intricately beautiful commercial glassware ever produced, always identified by its distinctive mark—the name “Three Rivers” in varying form accompanied by a five-pointed star. This innovative young enterprise set standards for bottle and jar design that influenced the glass container industry throughout the nation and furthered the modern concept that attractive packaging enhances the sale of a product.

Three Rivers glass has always held a local interest in South Texas where the business was conceived.



Some examples of one-pint Three Rivers glass jars. The Three Rivers glass company pioneered decorative glass containers.

However, in recent years, glass and bottle collectors in other areas of the United States have begun to recognize the uniqueness of bottles and jars manufactured by the small Texas glass maker.

The glass containers of the Three Rivers Glass Company are legitimate American art forms in their own right. Few of the bottles and jars from various periods of domestic and foreign commercial glass production compare with the exquisite shape and workmanship of the best of the Three Rivers glass products.

Mr. Charles R. Tips was the primary individual responsible for the es-

tablishment of a glass production facility in the arid brush country of South Texas. As founder of the township of Three Rivers (then Hamiltonburg) in March, 1913, his name became central in the development of the area for the next thirty years.

During the late teens and early twenties, the brush country of South Texas fell heir to an unexpected bonus: the discovery of huge oil and gas deposits. Oilmen drilled several production wells in and around the town of Three Rivers including one on Charles Tips' property just north of the original townsite. During this same period of time other prospectors and geologists discovered large deposits of quart-

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zose sand just north of Three Rivers. Quartzose sand is essential in the production of high quality glass. Given a surplus of manpower in the area, the fact that no glass manufacturer existed in Texas at the time, and with the availability of natural resources in the area, Tips and other investors realized the potential for a glass factory in Three Rivers.

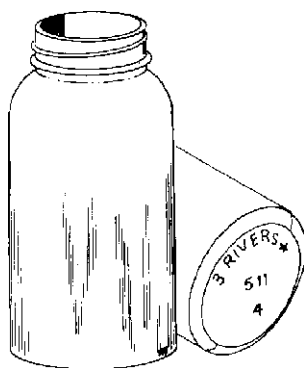
In late 1921, Charles Tips placed an advertisement in the *Glass Industry* trade journal extolling the advantages of a glass making plant in Three Rivers. Naively, Tips hoped the ad would lure an established glass manufacturer to the town. H.L. Warrick of Cleveland, Ohio was one of the few respondents to the advertisement. Warrick lost his glass factory and cash reserves in a fire the previous year. However, if Tips and partners could raise fifty-thousand dollars, Warrick stated he would offer his expertise in managing a glass making facility. Warrick moved to the Three Rivers area in early 1922 and the investment group incorporated the company in May of that year. Construction began that summer at the plant site located just west of the townsite between the railroad tracks and the Frio river.

When Warrick became general manager of the fledgling company he brought several skilled glass artisans from Ohio with him including master mold makers and glass blowers. It should be noted that all glass turned out by the Three Rivers Glass Company during the first two years of business was hand blown. During this time, Tips and the other investors traveled throughout the south trying to drum up business for the new company. It soon became obvious that the company could not effectively compete as long as it continued to rely on the antiquated hand-blowing techniques used at the plant.

Even though Tips and his partners obtained the financial backing to purchase glass blowing machines, obtaining those machines proved difficult.

The Hartford-Empire company of Newark, New Jersey controlled the manufacturing of all glass production machinery in the United States. Pressure from the large companies blocked Hartford-Empire from selling Tips the machines the company needed. Thanks to this obstacle, it appeared that the company was doomed to bankruptcy. Tips, however, found the solution to this problem in the Mexican town of Monterrey, south of Three Rivers.

For some time, glassmakers in Mexico had been importing a lot of quartzose sand from the Three Rivers area for glass production south of the border. Further, engineer Harold Trembley resided in Mexico and designed glass production equipment for a Mexican glass company in Monterrey. Trembley agreed to oversee the con-



Red book #2800. Showing the characteristic Three Rivers' star.

Drawing courtesy of Doug Leybourne and can not be reproduced.

struction of some glassmaking machines for Three Rivers, machinery identical to that which he helped to design and produce in Monterrey. Trembley's equipment was so good that it rivaled equipment produced in the United States. With the help of the ingenious Trembley, Three Rivers came back on track.

By 1925, as Warrick was apparently unable to manage an automated glass factory, John Finkbeiner took his place as general manager. Soon after the Three Rivers plant began mass production of glass with their own machinery, the Hartford-Empire Company

loosened its control of glassmaking machinery and offered to sell Three Rivers some additional components making the plant a first-rate manufacturing facility.

By 1929 the company was manufacturing 75% of the milk, beverage, packing and food container bottles used in Texas. By this same year the company held thousands of trademarked glass molds for hundreds of customers. In late 1930, Belgian sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who was residing in nearby Beeville, joined the design staff at Three Rivers. Borglum was famous for the creation of Mount Rushmore and his addition to the company added an element of prestige to the entire operation. Collectors may credit Broglum for many of the fancy and attractive designs that made Three Rivers famous.

In the early thirties, Three Rivers began to make competitive inroads outside of Texas. In fact, Three Rivers was so successful it began to draw the attention of major manufacturers such as Owens-Illinois and the Ball Brothers. These companies began engaging in vicious price-cutting on the molds they held which were "similar" to the ones produced by Three Rivers. Not to be outdone, the company began producing more innovative designs and began shipping its products by truck to avoid problems then associated with shipping glass by railroad.

In the early years of the Great Depression, the company continued to do remarkably well despite the dismal economic circumstances. When customers of the glass company became increasingly unable to make payments in lump sums, the company turned to producing script for their employees to spend locally. However, economic chaos came to the company in the mid-thirties when principle stockholder W.L. Moody declared bankruptcy causing a financial crisis at Three Rivers.

Tips was acquainted with Jesse Jones of Houston, Texas, who had been appointed by president Roosevelt to administer the Reconstruction Finance Program designed to help ailing businesses. Tips was able to secure a loan from the program to bolster the com-

pany. However, the government agency made the loan contingent on two things. One, federal engineers had to inspect the plant for production capability and two, the savings and loan company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which held the mortgage on the glass plant, had to agree to allow the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to hold the first lien on the plant and all its facilities.

There seemed to be little doubt that the Tulsa company would be willing to defer to the RFC. The Three Rivers board of directors enlisted the services of one William Church, an attorney in San Antonio who had done business with the Tulsa savings and loan to discuss the matter with them. Church convinced the board that he could persuade Tulsa to turn over the mortgage. What the unsuspecting board didn't know was that Church also represented one of their old arch rivals, the Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company.

Ball Brothers held glass manufacturing interests in Texas and Oklahoma and Three Rivers had given Ball a serious run for their money in Texas and the South. When Ball learned of the financial status of Three Rivers they took advantage of that inside information and in 1937, the Ball Brothers closed a transaction on the purchase of the Three Rivers Glass Company. According to Charles Tips, the company received enough new contracts at the time of the Ball takeover to keep the plant running twenty-four hours a day for at least the following year. Ball maintained operation of the plant throughout 1937 to honor the contracts that the Three Rivers Glass company had acquired and then began dismantling the plant.

As a footnote, the Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company was later indicted for violation of the anti-trust laws. Through testimony by Charles R. Tips and others, enough evidence was gathered to convict Ball on the charges. Although the company was eventually forced to pay a fine for its actions, it was too little too late for the former employees of the glass plant and the citizens of Three Rivers, Texas.

For further information read Michael Simmons-Smith's book: *Texas Glass: An Illustrated History of the Three Rivers Glass Company, 1922 - 1937*, from which the above article was taken. The book is available from the author for \$7.95; it can be obtained by writing the author at 4400 Adelphi Lane, Austin, Texas, 78727. The book contains in-

depth history of the glass plant, a price guide and illustrated photos and historical drawings of the plant and its products. Bottles and Extras would like to thank Mr. Smith for his assistance in preparing this story. *Photos by Charles Arnott.*



Items illustrating the Three Rivers style. Top left to right: Nehi, "It", Delaware Punch, Threemor, Nicholson Brand, Kraus Bottled Purity and Royal Crown Root Beer. Right: an amber and clear H & H Coffee. Bottom left to right: Quart juice bottle with stars, Mistletoe Creameries, Roselawn Farms, Mistletoe Creameries (half-pint) and a half pint milk bottle.

